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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 002251

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SUBJECT: MBEKI SHYS AWAY FROM IDEA OF POLITICAL LEGACY

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Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Madeline Seidenstricker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Former President Thabo Mbeki gave his first extended press interview since being removed from the presidency in September 2008 by the African National Congress (ANC). In the interview with the "Sunday Independent," Mbeki sought to distance himself from some of the more controversial parts of his legacy such as his handling of the political crisis in Zimbabwe and his stance on HIV/AIDS. (Note: Mbeki said nothing about HIV/AIDS. End Note.) Mbeki also denied that he is involved in the Congress of the People (COPE). Although the Mbeki interview was an easy way for the former South African leader to re-engage publicly after more than 12 months of relative silence, it probably is too soon for him to counter the overwhelming anti-Mbeki sentiment within the ANC and among many South African citizens. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Mbeki gave a two part interview to Makhudu Sefara that appeared in the October 24 and November 1 editions of the "Sunday Independent." Mbeki conducted the conversation with Sefara from his home in Johannesburg and was reportedly relaxed, in a golf shirt and khaki pants. Sefara described him as a man who still wants answers from Pietermaritzburg High Court Judge Chris Nicholson. (Note: It was Nicholson's judgment in September 2008 in favor of current President Jacob Zuma that prompted the ANC to recall Mbeki. Nicholson argued that he could not discount Zuma's claims that there was a "political conspiracy" against him perpetuated by the state and Mbeki's associates. End Note.) Mbeki admitted in the interview that Nicholson "made me angry."

¶3. (SBU) Mbeki began by saying that he does not think the idea of a "legacy attributed to a person is correct." He asserted that whatever happened during his terms as Deputy President and then President to collective decisions made by the ANC. In his view, there is nothing during the past 15 years that can be attributed to one individual. Mbeki said, "Indeed, the three manifestos that followed (the three manifestos from emerged from ANC party congresses) emanated from policy positions that the ANC took. The idea of a legacy that can be personalized is historically, factually incorrect." After shying away from the idea of a legacy, Mbeki had more to add on specific issues:

-- On Zimbabwe, Mbeki argued that the ANC discussed the issue and set the agenda. He added that government tended to discuss and implement the ANC's recommendations. He noted, "As we engaged the Zimbabwean government, the ANC was doing its engagement with the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front. The daily grind, of course, fell to

individuals in the government ... individuals had to sit with Zimbabweans and sort out the issue."

-- On South African economic policy, he said that specific policy plans such as the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) and the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Plan (GEAR) emerged when the government saw that something was very wrong with macroeconomic balances and budget deficits. Mbeki asserted that the party decided to put the question to the ANC party congress in 1997, at which policies such as GEAR were supported by the collective.

-- On government efficiency, Mbeki said that the ANC made a mistake in 1994 by sending some of its best leaders to Parliament and to provinces instead of to local governments across the country. He said, "... By the time you had to constitute executive councils at local government we had to draw from a pool of people who were less experienced." He noted that this hurt the government's relationship with communities.

-- On service delivery, the former President said his government tried very hard to understand the root causes (of protests) and found that the trigger tended to be instances of corruption or political rivalries. He said to address the root causes of the protests his government held numerous community meetings to explain the situation at the national government. He added, "It was important that you are honest if you don't want trouble."

-- On his failed bid to win a third term as ANC leader in 2007, Mbeki was defiant in the idea that he "did not lose the plot." He stated, "When the issue was raised with me about running for president when there was another candidate, I

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said I've never looked for positions or campaigned. Even in the run-up to Polokwane (ruling party congress) I never canvassed anyone.

-- On COPE, a party with a number of his former close confidantes, Mbeki reaffirmed his statements from last year that he would not engage in domestic politics.

14. (C) Comment: Mbeki's interview a year after his unceremonious dismissal by the ANC suggests that he sees the need to begin rehabilitating his image. The talk with the "Sunday Independent" follows a public address he gave at the University of Witwatersrand several weeks ago. Rebuilding his reputation is unlikely to be easy, especially if he does not own up to some of the more controversial aspects of his 15 years in government. Years of decisions and actions show that Mbeki did dictate South Africa's stance toward Zimbabwe, push through policies such as RDP and GEAR, and ignore problems in local communities without listening to, or consulting, a collective. Moreover, his statements on not seeking a third term at Polokwane are disingenuous at best considering the amount of work his allies did to canvass and win him votes at the congress. Without honest answers, it probably is best for Mbeki to let his record speak for itself because, while he may see an opening to re-assert himself as a public figure, it is unclear whether the public is ready to re-embrace him. End Comment.
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